

**Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Wildlife Division**

Draft Environmental Assessment

**BECKMAN WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA
PROPOSED ACQUISITION**

**Incorporating:
Barber Properties**

I. INTRODUCTION

Mr. LeRoy Byron Beckman's Last Will and Testament established the RBB Deer Lands Trust Fund to acquire lands for deer and public hunting. Mr. Beckman's Will instructed Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) to assist in locating these lands, and that the lands should be within Fergus, Judith Basin, Cascade, or Meagher Counties; mountain or valley lands; that are partly timbered; that has a stream running through it; and that the lands be comparable in cost to other lands in the area. Mr. Beckman further instructed that after the land was acquired the title and management be transferred to MFWP.

Within the 4 identified counties, MFWP personnel originally completed a thorough examination of numerous properties that were known to be for sale and that might meet Mr. Beckman's conditions. Of them, the Steiners' Trail's End Ranch, the Fertterer Property and the Green Property were the best matches. Those properties, acquired in the last 6 years, now constitute the Beckman Wildlife Management Area. They were accepted by the Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks Commission as gifts and added to the State's system of Wildlife Management Areas.

Additional property lying adjacent to the Beckman WMA became available as offered by the Barber family in 2005. These 1674 acres, collectively called the Barber Property, complement the original intent and purpose of the Beckman Will by providing additional deer habitat in a manner similar to the existing WMA. It features grassland, riparian and ponderosa pine/Douglas fir-juniper communities and functionally complements the original acquisitions.

Since the Barber Property includes these plant communities, as well as meets the terms of Mr. Beckman's Last Will and Testament, and further builds upon the ability to produce and harvest deer, the MFWP Region 4 Supervisor recommends that the Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission accept transfer of fee title and management of the Property from the RBB Deer Lands Trust Fund, and that the property be added to the Beckman Wildlife Management Area (WMA).

II. AUTHORITY AND DIRECTION

MFWP is authorized by statute (87-1-201) to protect, enhance and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future. In 1987, the Montana Legislature passed HB526 that authorizes and regulates wildlife habitat leases, conservation easements, and/or fee title acquisition (87-1-241 and 242). The Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission and the State Land Board must approve any acquisition of land proposed by the agency. This Environmental Assessment is part of the decision making process.

III. LOCATION OF PROJECT and PHYSIOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

The proposed Property is 1674 acres located in the Judith River breaks, Fergus County, 12 miles northeast of Denton, Montana (see map Appendix I). It adjoins the existing Beckman Wildlife Management Area to the north, sharing four miles of common boundary. It consists of steep-sided coulees with ridges that drain directly into the Judith River directly.

Elevations range from 3100 to 3340 feet. Soils are generally deep well drained clay loams. Annual precipitation ranges from 12 to 16 inches. The mean temperature is 44 degrees Fahrenheit. The average frost-free period is 120 to 130 days.

Legal description of the proposed Project property:

County: Fergus

Township 19 North, Range 16 East, M.P.M. (Tract I)

Section 21: E1/2SE1/4
Section 22: SW1/4
Section 27: NW1/4
Section 28: NW1/4NE1/4, N1/2NW1/4
Section 29: NE1/4NE1/4

Township 19 North, Range 15 East, M.P.M. (TractII)

Section 25: SE1/4NE1/4, N1/2NE1/4, E1/2NW1/4, NE1/4SW1/4

Township 19 North, Range 16 East, M.P.M. (TractII)

Section 29: S1/2SW1/4
Section 30: Lots1,2,3 and 4 (W1/2W1/2), E1/2W1/2, W1/2NE1/4, SE1/4, SE1/4NE1/4
Section 31: Lots1,2,5 and 6
Section 32: NW1/4NW1/4

Total Deeded = 1674.67 acres

The accompanying map (Appendix I) displays the lands affected by the proposal. The project's exterior boundary is irregularly shaped and borders the existing WMA. Four different private landowners border the Barber Property. Access to the Property exists by virtue of the adjoining four miles of common boundary with the Beckman WMA, by attachment to the Bear Springs County Road and by a dedicated public access roadway/right-of-way across private land established as part of the acquisition package.

IV. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROJECT

The proposed Property is upland river breaks habitat, consisting of three major vegetative types. A ponderosa pine / Douglas fir-juniper type occurs on the more moist ridges and coulees, a shrub-grassland / ponderosa pine type buffers the p. pine / Douglas fir-juniper type and a riparian type occurs adjacent to the Judith River. Active farming occurs on 51 acres of the Property. An additional 135 acres are presently enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). That contract expires in 2012. Commercial timber exists only in miniscule quantities and at questionable market value when financial and environmental costs are taken into consideration.

Because the Property has alternately steep and gentle terrain with several aspects, these vegetative types produce a diversity of plant species that offer quality deer forage through all seasons in most years. Consequently, the Property contributes to the support of year-round habitat for as many as 200 mule deer and 50 white-tailed deer on and adjacent to the existing WMA. Ring-necked pheasants, Merriam's Turkey, mountain lion, bobcat, coyote, beaver, fox, badger, and skunk use the property, as do a diverse group of small mammals, birds, amphibians and reptiles. A list of wildlife species potentially using this area is contained in Appendix II.

In the immediate area around Denton, Montana, there is little public land available to the public for recreation. Excluding the occasional tract of Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation land that is located on a public road, the closest legally accessible public land for deer hunting is at least 20 miles away. Public lands available for upland bird hunting or other recreational activities are also very scarce. The Barber Property augments existing public hunting and access opportunities on the adjacent WMA. Acquiring this Property would continue to build upon improved recreational opportunities in central Montana.

Since the Property contains riparian, shrub-grassland and ponderosa pine / Douglas fir-juniper types relative to the Habitat Montana classification of important and/or threatened habitats in Montana, and since the property is very good "WINTER-SUMMER range lands PRIMARILY FOR DEER", the property is most worthy of Mr. Beckman's vision that the land be "used for Wildlife Conservation purposes and as a Public Hunting Ground", and that it "shall be held in PERPETUITY".

V. SCOPE FOR THE PROJECT

Conserve and enhance land, water, and wildlife:

(1) The Property consists of 1674 acres. It will be managed in perpetuity to enhance soils, water, vegetation, and wildlife species' habitats for the benefit of the general public as part of the larger Beckman WMA.

(2) The current condition of the habitat is fair to good. Areas near water sources have been utilized heavily by livestock and are in fair to good condition. Vegetation condition is better in more remote, steep areas and farther from watering sources.

(3) Wildlife species of major interest are: mule deer, white-tailed deer, Ring-necked pheasant and Merriam's turkey. Species that are seasonally on the property and/or are not as abundant are mountain lion, bobcat, coyote, fox, badger, skunk and a variety of non-game birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians.

(4) Population objectives, as incorporated into the larger and contiguous WMA for the major wildlife species are: 200 mule deer and 50 white-tailed deer during fall, before hunting season. Current populations are estimated to be about 80% of objective for both species. Other wildlife species that are adapted to more residual and woody vegetative cover, as well as to agricultural crops such as alfalfa, will likely increase.

Contribute to hunting opportunity:

(1) The Property is accessible to the general public via foot travel from adjacent private lands with landowner permission and via the adjoining Beckman WMA. Access is also available directly off of the Bear Springs County Road. As part of the Property acquisition, an additional dedicated, 60-foot road right-of-way will be established to a second portion of the Property directly off of the County Road. Additional foot access may be pursued through enrollment of neighboring properties into MFWPs Block Management Program.

(2) The harvest objective for mule deer and for white-tailed deer will be driven by the larger WMA and hunting district and their objectives. These species' populations, and their harvest, will be surveyed and monitored annually. Harvest objectives may be changed accordingly.

Over time, as game populations respond to increased forage quantity and quality, hunting recreation should improve likewise. Big game hunter numbers will likely stabilize at some social threshold while upland bird hunter numbers will fluctuate over time as bird numbers vary according to habitat and climactic conditions. Hunting recreation for deer and upland birds alone is anticipated to reach 400 hunter days per year on the WMA.

Contribute to non-hunting recreation:

(1) Hiking, river floating, picnicking, camping, bird watching, wildlife observing, horseback riding, and antler and flower picking will be available to the general public from April 1 through December 15.

(2) The number of non-hunting recreation days provided is anticipated to be 250 days annually on the entire WMA.

Protect open space and scenic areas:

These vegetation and topographic features provide diverse and unique examples of native habitats threatened by recreational homesite development. The breaks and riparian vegetative types are excellent wildlife habitat that is attractive to wealthy hunters who want to own a private hunting ranch, or to outfitters wishing to increase their client base or client success/satisfaction. Such interests have been expressed or intended. This land will remain accessible to the general recreating public at no additional cost.

Maintain local tax base, while demonstrating productive wildlife habitat is compatible with agriculture and other land uses:

(1) Since the historic land use has been limited to livestock operations and small grain production, the change in tax dollars remitted to Fergus County when the property becomes a Wildlife Management Area, if different, will be minor. An annual "in lieu of taxes" payment will be made by MFWP to Fergus County in a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen (MCA 87-1-603).

(2) The primary goal for the property will be to improve the condition and productivity of all vegetative plant communities reflected on the larger WMA. This will increase the carrying capacity for deer and livestock. Since cattle grazing will be used as a tool to enhance the vegetation for wildlife, an actual reduction in the number of cattle grazed in the County may not be consequential. Approximately 187 tillable acres exists on the Barber Property.

Other Management Implications:

(1) The subject property has been managed as a remote, summer livestock grazing pasture. Fifty-one acres are presently farmed to alfalfa/small grains and another 135 acres are enrolled in CRP through year 2012. MFWP will maintain a grazing scheme that incorporates existing pasture layouts through the duration of a 7-year lease-back to the Barber family. Those pastures will be independent of existing range on the Beckman WMA. All of these practices will supplement the local agricultural economy.

(2) Several species of noxious weeds are found on the subject property. MFWP will endeavor to stop the spread and reduce the occurrence of noxious weeds on the property. Biological, chemical, and mechanical treatments will be used. The Barber family remains committed to noxious weed control on all acres enrolled in the CRP program.

(3) A minimal increase in MFWP manpower needs is expected relative to the Barber acquisition and management of the proposed property. Management practices will dovetail with the existing Beckman WMA. The Department will make physical improvements only as time and manpower allow. MFWP often contracts with private local businesses for materials and labor when fencing or other on-ground improvements are necessary.

VI. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT CHECKLIST

POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT						
ITEM:	MAJOR	MOD.	MINOR	NONE	UNK.	COMMENTS ATTACHED
TERRESTRIAL & AQUATIC LIFE & HABITATS	X					X
WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY, & DISTRIBUTION	X					X
GEOLOGY & SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY, & MOISTURE	X					X
VEGETATION COVER, QUALITY, & QUANTITY	X					X
AESTHETICS		X				X
AIR QUALITY				X		
DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL				X		
RESOURCES OF LAND WATER, AIR, & ENERGY				X		

VII. EXPLANATION OF IMPACTS TO THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

TERRESTRIAL AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS

Positive and major impacts to mule deer, white-tailed deer, upland game birds, native species' habitats, and aquatic habitats will occur as a result of management emphasis directed to improve vegetation communities for the benefit of both species of deer and upland game birds.

WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY, AND DISTRIBUTION

Water quality and quantity will improve with controlled livestock grazing that leaves more residual cover in the uplands and riparian areas. Site-specific water impoundments may receive additional fenced protection from livestock use.

GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY, AND MOISTURE

Major and positive impacts to soil conditions will occur due to reduced livestock trampling in riparian areas and increased forage remaining following grazing treatments. Increased amounts of residual vegetation over the entire area will improve soil fertility, quality, stability, and moisture retention.

VEGETATION COVER, QUALITY, AND QUANTITY

Positive and major impacts to mule deer, white-tailed deer, upland game birds, native species' habitats, and aquatic habitats will occur as a result of management emphasis directed to improve vegetation communities for the benefit of both species of deer and upland game birds. Because deer select/consume more browse and forbs than cattle, increased carrying capacity for deer as a consequence of changed livestock grazing will not nullify the improved vegetative condition.

AESTHETICS

Improvement of the visual quality of the area will occur as a result of improved vegetative composition, quantity, and quality.

VIII. HUMAN ENVIRONMENTAL CHECKLIST

POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON HUMAN ENVIRONMENT						
ITEM:	MAJOR	MOD.	MINOR	NONE	UNK.	COMMENTS ATTACHED
SOCIAL STRUCTURES & MORES				X		
CULTURAL UNIQUENESS & DIVERSITY				X		
LOCAL & STATE TAX BASE & TAX REVENUE			X			X
AGRICULTURAL OR INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION				X		
HUMAN HEALTH				X		

POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON HUMAN ENVIRONMENT (Continued)						COMMENTS ATTACHED
ITEM:	MAJOR	MOD.	MINOR	NONE	UNK.	
ACCESS TO & QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL & WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES	X					X
QUANTITY & DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT				X		
DISTRIBUTION & DENSITY OF POPULATION & HOUSING				X		
DEMANDS FOR ENERGY				X		
LOCALLY ADAPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS/GOALS				X		
TRANSPORTATION NETWORKS & TRAFFIC FLOWS			X			X

IX. EXPLANATION OF IMPACTS TO THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUE

MFWP will make annual tax payments to Fergus County in a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen (MCA 87-1-603). A slight reduction in the number of cattle grazed in the county may occur, though private agricultural operators who lease grazing on the property may actually increase their livestock numbers. Having the Property open to public recreation will increase income to local merchants and businesses. Cumulatively, this will be a minor positive effect on tax revenues.

AGRICULTURAL OR INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION

The anticipated improvement in range condition and production will allow continued livestock production while simultaneously improving wildlife production.

ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES

Improved recreational opportunities will occur as a result of public ownership of the project area. Compared to past recreational opportunities, the impact will be a major improvement for the public.

TRANSPORTATION NETWORK AND TRAFFIC FLOWS

During the fall hunting season there will a minor increase in human traffic to the property. During the winter there will be no traffic to the property. During the spring/summer period foot traffic will probably be unchanged compared to past

uses. All in all the impact will be minor.

X. DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION OF REASONABLE ALTERNATIVES

1. No Action Alternative:

The “No Action” alternative would not preserve or enhance the diversity of wildlife habitats on the property for perpetuity. The “No Action” alternative would not preserve or enhance the general public’s recreational opportunities in perpetuity. This alternative would not honor Mr. Beckman’s Last Will and Testament.

2. Fee Title Acquisition Alternative: (Preferred Alternative)

To comply with Mr. Beckman’s Last Will and Testament, the RBB Deer Lands Trust Fund desires to transfer fee title and management of the property to MFWP. The “Preferred” alternative would grant this transfer, and the property would be incorporated into the existing Beckman Wildlife Management Area. It would be managed primarily for deer and deer hunting. This alternative also meets important habitat objectives of MFWP.

XI. EVALUATION OF NEED FOR AN EIS

Based on the environmental assessment (EA), there will not be any significant negative impacts from the proposed action. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not required and an EA is the appropriate level of review. The overall impact from the successful completion of the proposed action would provide substantial long-term benefits to both the physical and human environment.

XII. SCHEDULED PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

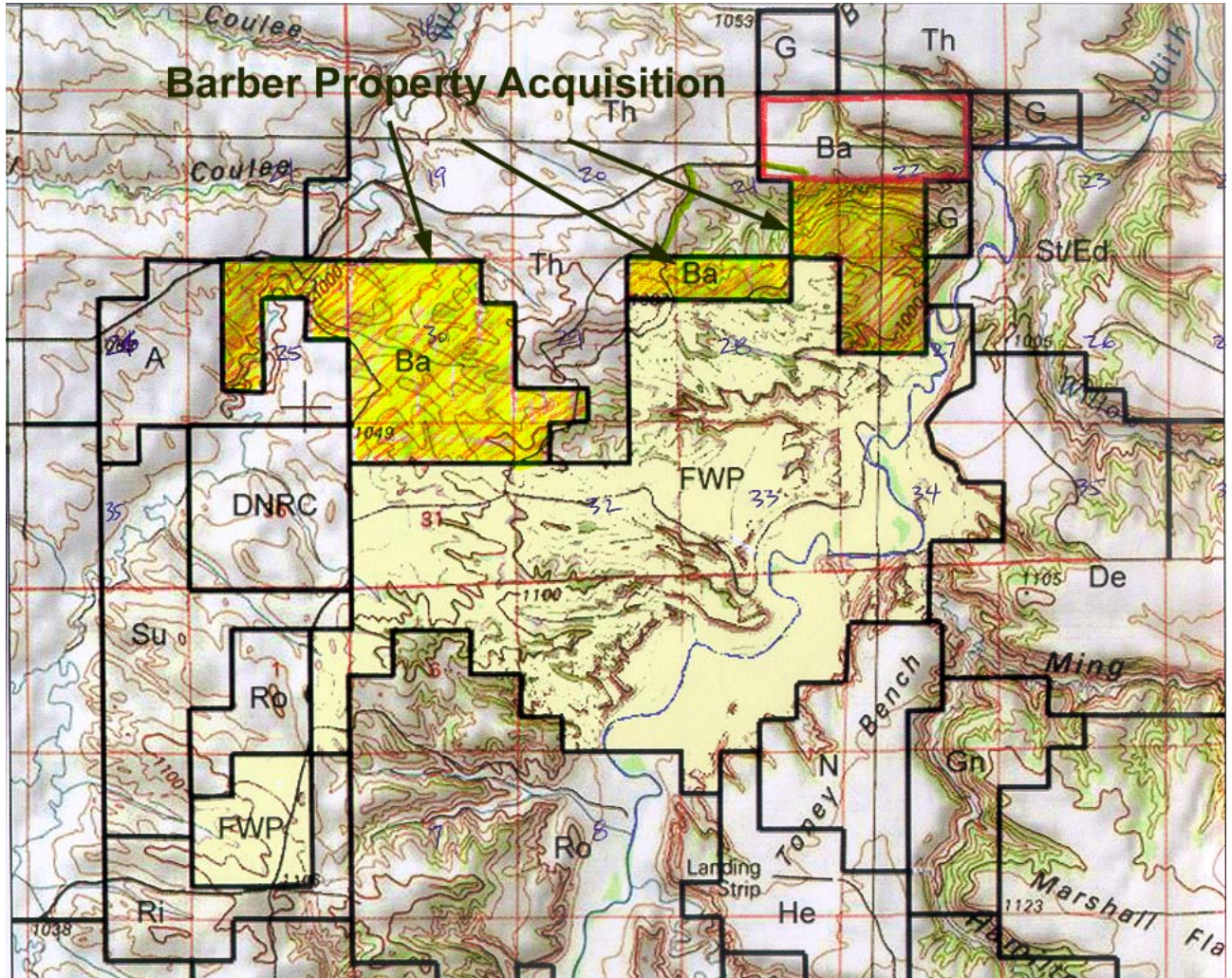
A public comment period will begin September 2, 2005 and end September 23, 2005. Duration of the comment period for the Draft Environmental Assessment is 22 days. A public hearing is not scheduled. Written comment should be delivered to the following address(es):

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks
Wildlife Division
% Beckman WMA
4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405

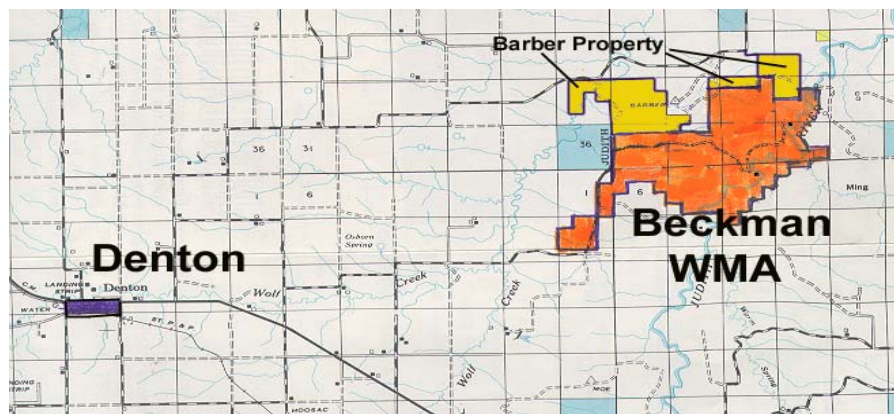
or,

E-mail: fwprg42@mt.gov (Include Beckman WMA in Subject heading.)

Appendix I I



Barber Property proposed acquisition highlighted in yellow.



Local proximity map for Beckman WMA and Barber Property.

APPENDIX II

Species listed below occur on the Beckman Wildlife Management Area, to include the Barber Property:

Mammals

Common shrew
Montana shrew
Little brown myotis
Long-eared myotis
Long-legged myotis
Small-footed myotis
Big brown bat
Hoary bat
Silver-haired bat
Townsend's big-eared bat
Ermine
Long-tailed weasel
Mink
River otter
Badger
Striped skunk
Red fox
Coyote
Mountain lion
Bobcat
Raccoon
Yellow-bellied marmot
Richardson's ground squirrel
Yellow-pine chipmunk
Red squirrel
Northern pocket gopher
Deer mouse
Bushy-tailed wood rat
Ord's kangaroo rat
Meadow vole
Gapper's red-backed vole
Montane vole
Prairie vole
Sagebrush vole
Western jumping mouse
Grasshopper mouse
Beaver
Muskrat
Porcupine
White-tailed jackrabbit
Mountain cottontail
Elk
White-tailed deer
Mule deer
Moose
Pronghorn

Birds (yearlong, seasonal, migratory)

Pintail
Mallard
Gadwall
Blue-winged teal
Cinnamon teal
Green-winged teal
Northern shoveler
American wigeon
Wood duck
Common goldeneye
Common merganser
Canada goose
Great blue heron
Sandhill crane
Common snipe
Turkey vulture
Northern harrier
Sharp-shinned hawk
Cooper's hawk
Brown creeper
Rock wren

Northern goshawk
Swainson's hawk
Red-tailed hawk
Ferruginous hawk
Rough-legged hawk
Bald eagle
Golden eagle
American kestrel
Merlin
Prairie falcon
Gray partridge
Blue grouse
Ruffed grouse
Sharp-tailed grouse
Sage grouse
Merriam's turkey
Ring-necked pheasant
Killdeer
Solitary sandpiper
Long-billed curlew
Rock dove
Mourning dove
Great horned owl
Long-eared owl
Northern pygmy-owl
Short-eared owl
Northern saw-whet owl
Burrowing owl
Common nighthawk
Common poorwill
Rufous hummingbird
Belted kingfisher
Lewis' woodpecker
Yellow-bellied sapsucker
Downy woodpecker
Hairy woodpecker
Northern flicker
Western wood-peewee
Hammond's flycatcher
Dusky flycatcher
Western flycatcher
Say's phoebe
Western kingbird
Eastern kingbird
Horned lark
Tree swallow
Violet-green swallow
Cliff swallow
Barn swallow
Rough-winged swallow
Blue jay
Gray jay
Steller's jay
Pinyon jay
Clark's nutcracker
Black-billed magpie
American crow
Common raven
Black-capped chickadee
Mountain chickadee
Red-breasted nuthatch
White-breasted nuthatch
House wren
Golden-crowned kinglet
Ruby-crowned kinglet
Eastern bluebird
Townsend's solitaire
Swainson's thrush
Hermit thrush
American robin
Gray catbird
Sprague's pipit

Bohemian waxwing
Cedar waxwing
Northern shrike
Loggerhead shrike
European starling
Warbling vireo
Solitary vireo
Yellow warbler
Yellow-rumped warbler
McGillivray's warbler
Common yellowthroat
Wilson's warbler
Western tanager
Lazuli bunting
Spotted towhee
American tree sparrow
Chipping sparrow
Clay-colored sparrow
Brewer's sparrow
Vesper sparrow
Lark sparrow
Savannah sparrow
Grasshopper sparrow
Fox sparrow
Song sparrow
White-crowned sparrow
Dark-eyed junco
Lapland longspur
Snow bunting
Red-winged blackbird
Bobolink
Western meadowlark
Brewer's blackbird
Common grackle
Brown-headed cowbird
Rosy finch
Cassin's finch
House finch
Red crossbill
Common redpoll
Pine siskin
American goldfinch
House sparrow

Amphibians

Tiger salamander
Woodhouse's toad
Western chorus frog
Northern leopard frog

Reptiles

Short-horned lizard
Snapping turtle
Racer
Milk snake
Gopher snake
Western rattlesnake
Common garter snake